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ABSTRACT

Noting that the idea of reading as a natural language communication process has been well established by research, this paper identifies learning strategies and suggests teaching methods for developing the young child's awareness of the communication nature of reading. The paper concludes that learning strategies based on imitation, drawing, and graphic imagery, as well as the use of environmental print, reading to children, and language experience activities that encourage scribbling, drawing, and writing, will help children to master both oral and written language. (FL)

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DEVELOPING THE COMMUNICATION NATURE OF READING

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DEVELOPING THE COMMUNICATION NATURE OF READING

Studies of the spontaneous early reader provide a profile of the child who treats written language as a natural alternative to spoken language (Durkin, 1961; Torrey, 1973; Price, 1976; Forester, 1977). The successful reader tends to be the product of a responsive communication environment which provides contact with the printed word (Durkin, 1959, 1961, 1963a, 1963b, 1966, 1974; Torrey, 1973; Price, 1976; Forester, 1977; Teale, 1978). Having discovered that written language "says something", the child seems to follow a progression of steps toward cognitive clarity that leads to effective use of phonics, rules, and decoding skills (Fryer, 1976; Price, 1976; Forester, 1977; Downing, 1977).

While the notion of reading as a natural language communication process has become well established in the literature (Huey, 1968; Moffett, 1968; Coxon, 1972; Ryan, 1977; Forester, 1977; Ylisto, 1977; Goodman, 1979; Hall, 1979; Smith, 1979a, 1979b), we frequently observe kindergarten and first grade classrooms that are devoid of any signs of written work personally developed for or by the child. These classrooms are typically decorated with commercially produced bulletin boards, games emphasizing fragmented language, cardboard figures depicting a season, lists of spelling words and penmanship specimens. Stories and language activities produced by children are conspicuous by their absence. In other classrooms an abundance of child centered written work is in evidence. Notes from the principal to a child praising good work are

found along with thank you letters from one class to another. The reading table is piled with class collections of favorite poems or jokes, experience stories, and a scrapbook about safety in the neighborhood.

The purpose of this article is to identify learning strategies and to suggest classroom techniques for developing the young child's awareness of the communication nature of reading.

LEARNING STRATEGIES

Imitation and graphic imagery. Piaget and Inhelder (1969) identified in order of increasing complexity four behavior patterns indicative of representational thought within which language develops: 1) imitation, 2) symbolic play, 3) drawing or graphic imagery, and 4) mental imagery. Unlike language, these behavior patterns are based on imitation and are invented by the child. Language, while not acquired by imitation, is acquired within the context of imitation and is transmitted to rather than invented by the child.

According to Piaget and Inhelder (1969) language appears concurrent with but presupposes the prior development of 1) imitation, 2) symtolic play, 3) drawing or graphic imagery, and 4) mental imagery. Through imitation and symbolic play the child assimilates a symbolic language system. Through drawing or graphic imagery, he or she constructs an internal image which produces mental imagery. The child assimilates language as sign into his system of internal representation. Language thus derives its personal meaning from the child's internal symbolic system.

Durkin (1966), Smith (1976), and Ylisto (1976) provide evidence which suggests that the child internalizes written language as sign through the use of imitation and graphic imagery. Based on her studies Durkin (1966) found that curiosity about printed language began with an interest in scribbling and drawing followed by copying objects and letters of the alphabet. Smith (1976) and Ylisto (1977) found that from about the age of three years, the young child begins to acquire an understanding of the purpose and function of environmental print: i.e., signs and labels.

Environmental print and printed text: Smith (1979a, 1979b) noted that environmental print functions much like spoken language in that it is intimately related to the situation in which it occurs. TV captions and commercials; names on products at the supermarket or in the kitchen cupboard; signs in streets, stories, or shopping malls operate in the child's immediate world to deliver a message. The child can derive the meaning of environmental print as he can derive the meaning of spoken language from the situation in which it occurs. In contrast to environmental print, printed text which is the language of stories, magazines, and newspapers is not directly related to the situation in which it occurs. Rather, printed text tends to be abstract in that it refers to situations remote in time and space (Smith, 1979a, 1979b).

While children seem to learn early that environmental print "says something", they become sensitized to the purpose and function of printed

text only through repeated experiences of being read to from books, magazines, and papers. Indeed, research repeatedly shows that reading to children helps them to understand the nature of the reading task as well as to become familiar with patterns of written language. Forester (1977) hypothesized a progression of steps which the spontaneous early reader seems to follow in learning to read. From repeated readings of familiar material, the child memorizes the story, learns to recognize words, and from word recognition derives sound values which are used to sound out unfamiliar words.

Summary. Children seem to internalize and acquire mastery of written as well as oral language through imitation and drawing or graphic imagery as well as through symbolic play and mental imagery. Classroom teachers can expect that most children will enter kindergarten and first grade with some awareness of the purpose and function of environmental print. Some, but not all, children will be familiar with printed text. Other children may enter school still at the "scribble" stage.

While initiating instruction in reading readiness and beginning reading skills, the classroom teacher may wish to incorporate imitation and graphic imagery into his or her lessons as effective learning strategies. The classroom teacher may also wish to implement a communication oriented approach to reading instruction through the use of 1) environmental print; 2) reading to children, and 3) language experience activities which envourage scribbling as well as drawing and writing. Following are suggestions for classroom techniques which the classroom teacher may use to develop children's awareness of reading as communication.

CLASSROOM TECHNIQUES

Environmental print. The classroom teacher can establish a classroom atmosphere rich in environmental print through the practice of labeling, writing simple directions and messages, and by taking advantage of the opportunities that grow naturally out of daily classroom activities.

First, choose a classroom object for labeling. Encourage pupils to discuss the object in detail: its purpose(s), physical properties, location, and other pertinent information. Then, in the presence of the children write the label on a sentence strip, using the object's name in sentence context: i.e., "This is our piano." Print the label large enough to be seen easily from anywhere in the room. Place the label on or near the object. Direct the pupils' attention to the label several times during the day, and read the sentence aloud to them.

Label no more than one object a day. As new labels are written, some children will begin to recognize words that have been used in previously written labels. Some children will read the words correctly and ultimately, reach the level of instant recognition of the unique appearance of total word forms. This is the beginning of true sight vocabulary.

In addition to the common practice of posting the names of room helpers, the day, the weather, the class schedule, and classroom rules and regulations, use environmental print to give simple directions. For example: tell the children that you have listed their names in groups and that one group at a time is to line up for the bus, to go to the lavatory, library, lunchroom, or playground. Post the list so that the

children get their directions from print. If you are reading the names for classes of non-readers, point to each name as you say it.

Write simple messages such as: "Happy Birthday,_____;" "Congratulations, _____, on your good work!" "Welcome back, _____. We missed you!" "Today we will have a visitor." Encourage the children to write simple messages to the class such as: "I have a new pet;" "My cat had kittens;" "I lost my pencil;" "My grandma came to visit."

Take advantage of the opportunities that grow naturally out of the daily activity in the classroom. For example, when children gather around a new pet and the feeding schedule is discussed, write a chart that tells how much food is to be given and when it is to be given. Classroom attendance, the daily milk or lunch count can also be posted. To stimulate children's awareness of environmental print, direct their attention to signs along the road, on buildings, in vacant lots, and on shops when taking field trips or walking around the school. Discuss the meaning and importance of the signs.

Reading to children. For some children, the classroom is their first experience with printed text. For the young listener to realize that the language being heard is contained on the pages rather than in the reader's head is a difficult and demanding task. The posting and reading of messages from the office, announcements, lunchroom menus, and bus schedules serves as a transition from environmental print to printed text. A simple technique at this stage of development is to point to the words as they are being read.

For those children who are just being introduced to printed text,

picture books with little or no text as well as short stories with rhythmical, melodious, repetitive phrases and predictable passages are good choices. Discuss the pictures with the children. Pictures bridge the gap between the concrete experiences of the children and the abstract experiences presented by the author. Repetitive phrases encourage the young listener to participate in the reading. Predictable passages enable children to anticipate the text that is to follow.

Eventually, most children want to hear favorite stories again and again. The desire to imitate and participate is soon demonstrated by the child who is read to regularly. Encourage and invite imitation and participation. The next step is independent "reading". The child predicts story text from picture clues and reconstructs the language of the text in terms of his or her own language competence. The process of imitating and participating, predicting and reconstructing the story text strengthens the bond bet een the spoken word and its graphic representation.

Once the practice of imitation and participation is established, the teacher may wish to introduce "assisted reading". Initially the teacher should encourage repetition of recurring phrases. Next the teacher will omit recurring phrases and invite the listeners to provide them. Should the children not respond, the teacher should supply the phrase and continue reading.

For beginning readers, supplementing the daily reading lesson with the pleasurable experience of reading all time favorites offers opportunity for practice which is a significant factor in learning to read. Group together four or five children somewhere in the room where they will not disturb others in the class or be disturbed by them. Let the

children sit at desks or at a table on which their books can rest, leaving their hands free to follow the lines of print. Give each child an identical book. Be sure that it is a familiar, well loved story. If the school is unable to buy duplicate copies of many books, encourage parents to give them as classroom gifts to mark their children's birthdays rather than the traditional cake and ice cream treat.

Sit with the children, with your copy of the book, and begin to read. Invite participation, but never demand it. Make no conscious effort to have the children memorize the story. As they read along with you, encourage the group to complete larger and larger parts of sentences until they can read the whole story.

The small group provides a secure and supportive environment that tends to promote a wide range of reading behaviors in various stages of development. Some children will self-correct when their reading does not make sense, sound like familiar language, or sound like expected intonation patterns. Some children will point to lines of print, moving from left-to-right across the page as they have seen you do. Be constantly alert and ready to pick up the reading when the goup or an individual falters. Hearing themselves read fluently and often enables children to develop awareness of the syntactical patterns of language and the flow of meaning. Introduce many well known stories to children in this way. Soon they will have an ever increasing library of favorite books from which to select the stories they want to read over and over again.

Language experience activities. Language experience activities provide children with concrete demonstrations of the communicative and

expressive purposes of written language. Probably the most important of all are the children's own experiences as authors. When dictating stories, children clearly perceive the reason why as well as the way in which an author writes. When reading these same stories, there is no doubt in the child's mind that written language tells the reader something. In addition, the language experience approach provides excellent opportunities for developing specific concepts of literacy, as for example: sentence, word, writing. Recognizing the children's problems in developing these concepts, the teacher will want to use the terms naturally and consistently in the incidental conversations that accompany the writing of language experience stories. Language experience allows children to observe the progression of words from oral language to print; the use of spaces for markers, punctuation and upper-and lower-case letters; and conventions, such as reading from left-to-right, top-to-bottom, one line at a time.

While the idea of personal word banks in not a new one, it is a technique that can be used in conjunction with language experience activities to help children become aware of reading as communication. Words that have been literally plucked from a child's own speaking vocabulary and used in the context of written sentences become meaningful representations to the child who generated the words. When a child reads one of his or her own sentences to others, both reader and listener have firsthand experience with reading as an act of communicating something to someone. Each word should be chosen by the child and used in a sentence generated by the child. Write each word in a sentence on a separate file card. Give it to the child to store in his or her own desk. These words can then be used in language experience activities

or in simple poetry such as the cinquain. They may also be used in word analysis exercises and crossword puzzles.

Generally children at the "scribble" stage experience difficulty with visual discrimination exercises such as identifying, matching, tracing, or copying shapes, letters, or numbers. The classroom teacher may wish to encourage the use of scribbling and drawing as an intermediate step in the transition from oral to written language. For children who may not be ready to trace or copy their language experience sentences or stories, tell them to make one scribble mark for each word that the teacher has written. Demonstrate the procedure at the chalkboard. As you say "The boy hit the ball," make a scribble to represent each word that you pronounce. Call attention to the spaces between each scribble mark. The spaces between the words on the written charts clearly mark the boundaries between word units. To further clarify the meaning of word, letter, and sentence, which are interchangeable to some children, the individual units can be framed with the hands when they are mentioned.

Picture writing using simple stick figures to represent the story being told or the idea being expressed provides another graphic imagery procedure which can be used to facilitate the transition from oral to written language. Again introduce and demonstrate the process by simultaneously telling and illustrating a simple story. Children quickly learn to do their own scribble writing and picture writing. The teacher can expect that the copying of letters and forms will soon follow.

An activity in which all children can participate is the writing of notes to their classmates. Some children will be able to write words.

Others will need to copy from their word banks and language experience stories. Encourage those who are not yet able to write words or to copy to use either picture writing or the scribble method. Appoint someone to deliver the mail or set up mail boxes for each child. Let the children read their letters, picture writings, and scribble notes. Allow children who receive picture writing and scribble notes to ask the writer, "What did you say?"

Conclusion. Torrey (1973) identified the key questions as being characteristic of the early reader: 1) How does something I say look in print? 2) What does that print say? Perhaps learning strategies based on imitation and drawing or graphic imagery, as well as the use of 1) environmental print, 2) reading to children and 3) language experience activities which encourage the use of scribbling, drawing and writing will facilitate the generation of these questions by the beginning reader.

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